

Retrieving the Tradition:

Excerpts from Past Issues of *Melita Theologica*

Joseph Lupi, “The Homily,”

Melita Theologica 17, no.2 (1965): 35-48.

When the language of the people was slowly changing from Latin, the Church began insisting with the bishops that they should use the language of the people in their homilies. In 813, the Council of Rheims enjoined bishops to preach the sermons of the Fathers in the dialect of their several dioceses, so that all might understand. In the same year, the Council of Tours ordered that every bishop should have homilies prepared containing needful admonitions for the use of those under them and that each should endeavour to translate into the Rustic-Roman and Teutonic tongue so that all might easily understand the things spoken; the same thing was imposed by the Council of Mayence in 847.¹

But as early as the third century we find traces of the Church's preoccupation that the Word of God be fully understood by the faithful. The *Euchologion* of Serapion of Thmuis has a prayer - *pro episcopo et ecclesia* - in which mention is made of the *lectores* and the *interpretes*: these were those who translated the liturgical passages for the benefit of the faithful. These interpreters are also mentioned in Etheria's *Peregrinatio*.²

¹ Can. 17 of the Council of Tours says: “in rusticam Romanam linguam aut Theotiscam quo facilius cuncti possint intellegere quae dicuntur.”

² “... episcopus, licet siriste noverit, tamen semper graece loquitur et numquam siriste: itaque ergo stat semper presbyter, qui, episcopo graece dicente, siriste interpretatur, ut omnes audiant quae exponuntur. Lectiones etiam, quaecumque in ecclesia leguntur, quia necesse est graece legi, semper stat qui siriste interpretatur propter populum, ut semper discant. Sane quicunque hic latini sunt, id est qui nec siriste nec graece noverunt, ne contriscentur, et ipsis exponitur eis, quia sunt alii fratres et sorores graecolatini, qui latine exponunt eis.”

Translations are not the best solution to bring the Word of God to the people: we have already referred to St Augustine's insistence to make himself understood by the people rather than please the *grammatici*. St Gregory of Tours and St Caesarius of Arles purposely used the popular Latin in their sermons to be understood by their faithful. The inscription on the tomb of Pope Gregory V (d. 999) makes reference to his sermons in the vulgar tongue.³ Briefly, it was the duty of the preacher to find above all through his own efforts the proper medium between the language of the people and the pretensions of the highly educated.

The sermon during Mass has passed through many vicissitudes during the centuries. In the early Church there was little scope for the rhetorical arts of the orator: one spoke *ex abundantia cordis et plenitudine intima charitatis*. At a later period, when the burden of doctrinal teaching and polemical discussion was thrown upon a far more cultured and leisurely class of clergy, the typical discourses of the age became more elaborate and literary in character, even while the great bulk of popular preaching remained comparatively unchanged. By the end of the fourth century, the rhetoric of the schools had completely made its way into the Church and in the brilliant group of Christian orators who flourished in this period, St John Chrysostom, St Basil the Great, St Gregory of Nyssa and St Gregory of Nazianzus, we have the typical examples of a greatly altered style of Christian preaching.

The custom of applauding the preacher with the clapping of hands and stamping of feet had by degrees extended itself in the churches, and this shows the great change that had come over the habits of Christians. Rhetoric had in fact speedily passed into mere unreal and fictitious artifice and the sermon sunk to be little higher than an intellectual exercise. The prevalent secularity of time may have been one of the causes which brought about a disuse of preaching: the little preaching there may have been in the eighth and ninth centuries shows a singular mixture of piety and dense ignorance.

A new blossoming was brought about by the Mendicant orders, but now the sermon is slowly separated from the Liturgy, and at a later stage, it will be regarded as an interpolation in the course of the Liturgy, rather than a step forward in its progress.

The Second Vatican Council in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy has again given the homily its original character and its lawful place in the Liturgy, for the homily is now again an exposition of the mysteries of faith and the guiding principle of Christian life during the liturgical year from the sacred texts read at

³ "Usus francisca, vulgari et voce latina / Instituit populus eloquio triplici," Mario Righetti, *Manuale di storia liturgica*, 2nd rev. ed. (Milano: Ancora, 1949-55), 3:220.

Mass; in simple and familiar language, it proclaims the fulfilment of the mystery of the Redemption *hic et nunc* in each one of those assembled together as God's own people; it is in a way the summit of a building up which slowly takes place every time the Liturgy of the Word is celebrated; the first step is the reading of the lessons and of the epistle by the lector; then follows the Gradual psalm which actually is the assembled congregation's response to the lessons proclaimed to them; then comes the solemn proclamation of the Gospel by the deacon; finally the celebrant himself, the one presiding the liturgical assembly, "breaks the bread of the Word," so that the Scripture which has been proclaimed to the assembly is assimilated by all and by each one according to his measure, before it finds its echo in the bidding prayers which conclude the Liturgy of the Word, and its fulfilment in the active participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice.